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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

**Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:**

Badina, S. (2020). The Diversity of Russia's Arctic Cities. *Russian Analytical Digest*, 256, 7-9. <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000440622>

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## The Diversity of Russia's Arctic Cities

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000440622

### Abstract:

This article describes the diversity of Russia's Arctic cities. As a group, Russia's northern urban agglomerations are larger than those found in the West. But there is enormous diversity among them that makes the region one of the most dynamic in the Russian Federation.

### Extensive Urbanization in the Russian Arctic

Russia's Arctic region boasts the highest level of urbanization in the country—about 88%. The population of the Arctic zone in Russia is 2.4 million people (1.6% of Russia's total), while their economic activities generate almost a tenth of the country's GDP (Leksin et al 2019). The main distinguishing feature of Russia's Arctic cities is their large populations. The Russian Arctic population is larger than the populations of the Arctic regions in all of the other Arctic countries combined. Russia also has the most Arctic cities with populations larger than 100,000 people and extensive centers for mining and processing natural resources (Pilyasov, 2011).

However, the internal differences among Russia's Arctic and Far Northern cities is as great as the differences between Russia's Arctic cities and the Arctic urban centers in Europe and North America. The following discussion lays out a typology of Russian Arctic cities.

### Capital Cities in the European Part of Russia's Arctic

Murmansk and Arkhangelsk are among the oldest urban centers in the Russian Arctic and are distinguished by their relatively soft climate conditions and the good transportation links to Russia's major metropolitan centers, which are the main drivers of the Russian economy. Thanks to these features, the two cities have unusually large populations for the Arctic (288,000 and 347,000 respectively) and numerous capital city features which afford a high standard of living—international airports, theaters, museums, symphony orchestras, and large regional hospitals. These cities play important roles as hub transportation centers, particularly through their port functions. Historically, Arkhangelsk was the only port from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century facilitating the export of Russian goods abroad. Murmansk is now a key modern port. Murmansk is Russia's northernmost ice-free port and the largest freight port on the Barents Sea. It shipped 60.7 million tons in

2018, which makes up 7.4% of Russia's trade freight and 65.5% of all trade ports in the Russian Arctic sea. Currently, in connection with plans to develop the Northern Sea Route, the federal government is making major investments in developing the region as a transportation corridor.

Naryan-Mar (pop. 25,000) occupies a special place within this group. It is the capital of the Nenets Autonomous Okrug. Called a national okrug in Soviet times, it is the home to a population that is primarily not ethnic Russian; in this case Nenets. During the 1930s, it was a support base for mining coal and oil from Komi. The first petroleum sector enterprise opened in the territory in the 1960s. This new industry cardinally changed the nature of the regional economy and shifted it to extracting fossil fuels. The resulting wealth led to the development of Naryan-Mar.

### Capital Cities of the Asian Part of the Russian Arctic

Salekhard, Yakutsk, Anadyr, and Magadan represent regional capitals in the Asian part of Russia's far north. Salekhard (population 51,000) began to provide capital city services in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. However, the role of this city in region is relatively small since it is located far from the extraction sites of the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Okrug and is poorly accessible. Due to these factors, its contribution to the social-economic life of region is the lowest of the cities we examine in Russia's Asian Arctic (See Table 1 on p. 10).

In contrast, Yakutsk, Anadyr, and Magadan concentrate practically all of the potential of their regions within their city limits. Yakutsk is unique as the capital of a republic within the Russian federal structure. Since the Soviet era, republics continue to exert a significant degree of autonomy. Yakutsk is also distinguished by the heavy Indigenous population. The Yakuts' unique culture, language, traditions, and local institutions are all well developed. Yakutsk is a major scientific and educational center, boasting many scientific organizations, including a Siberian branch of the Russian Academy

of Sciences and several universities. Accordingly, along with Arkhangelsk, the city is a regional base for Russian Arctic research. Yakutsk is developing thanks to considerable transfers from the federal budget. The city is one of the most heavily subsidized in the country, which in combination with the money that it earns from local natural resource mining, makes it possible to accumulate significant financial reserves.

Magadan and Anadyr are the most remote and isolated capitals of the Far East's two northern regions. In the post-Soviet period these cities have experienced the most significant population outflows—Magadan Oblast lost three-fourths of its population since 1989 and the Chukotka Autonomous Okrug has lost more than two-thirds. As a result, the main economic potential of the region is concentrated in these two cities.

In Anadyr, the local elite played the main role in its contemporary development. When Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich served as governor of Chukotka (2000–2008), he and other sources provided significant investment into the city and its social infrastructure. In 2005, Anadyr was named Russia's Most Comfortable City.

Magadan's economy is focused on mining gold and is therefore dependent on the fluctuations in the international gold prices. Given this dependence on unreliable markets, local resources to develop Magadan's city infrastructure are limited.

### **Cities Focused on Extracting Oil and Gas**

Novyi Urengoy, Noyabrsk, and Nadym are centers of Russia's oil and gas production. Novyi Urengoi (pop. 118,000) and Noyabrsk (pop. 107,000) are unusual for Russian cities in that their population and economies are larger than that of the regional capital Salekhard. As major centers of the oil and gas industry, these cities serve as among the few examples for the Russian Arctic of a sustainable trend of population growth in the post-Soviet period (Zamyatina 2017). Gazprom's investments in city development through its Home Town program and the high income level of the population make these cities among the most attractive for labor migrants coming from other Russian regions.

### **Monocities with a Stable Social-Economic Situation**

Vorkuta is a coal-producing city in the Komi Republic that has outlasted much of the demand for its main product. The majority of Russia's Arctic monocities grew up during the Soviet era of industrialization as part of regional production complexes. Vorkuta developed as part of the Komi-Pechersk complex, while Norilsk

grew within the North Yenisey complex. Severodvinsk emerged as a center of the military industry.

Currently, under market conditions, the problem of monocities is acute (Zemlyansky et al 2014) since many of them have relatively large populations which face constant hardship due to the struggles of the industries their cities serve. To address this problem, the Russian government has adopted a number of measures aimed at the diversification of the economies of monocities. Depending on the specialization of the key factory in each city, as well as its integration into larger industrial holding companies, monocities can be stable and self-sufficient over long periods of time.

The key enterprise for Vorkuta (pop. 54,000) is Vorkutaugol [Vorkuta Coal], which is part of Severstal [Northern Steel], one of the largest producers of steel in Russia. As a result, the social-economic situation of the city among other monocities is reasonably stable. But the stability does not address the ongoing challenges facing the city. In the post-Soviet period, Vorkuta has lost more than half of its population.

### **Monocities that Risk a Worsening of the Social-Economic Situation**

Norilsk (and the associated port city Dudinka), Monchegorsk, Nikel, and Severodvinsk are the best representatives of this category. Norilsk, Nikel, and Monchegorsk are cities of the Norilsk concern, which produces 35% of the world's palladium, 25% of its platinum, 20% of its nickel, 20% of its rhodium, and 10% of its Cobalt. Under favorable market conditions, the concern is profitable and the social-economic situations of the cities is stable. Severodvinsk, which is closed to foreign visitors, is the largest center of Russian ship construction, including production of atomic submarines, and is part of the Arkhangelsk agglomeration.

### **Monocities in a Difficult Social-Economic Situation**

Onega and Kirovsk face debilitating challenges. The base of the Onega economy is forestry products, whereas Kirovsk focuses on mining apatite-nepheline ore. Kirovsk is now developing cross-country ski tourism and has become one of the skiing centers in Russia thanks to its long season and low prices. Its rates are lower than those charged by the ski resorts of the Caucasus region and has better transportation links for residents of the European part of the country than do Siberian resorts.

### **Exceptional Cities**

Labytnangi, Kandalaksha, and Apatity do not fit into any of the categories above. Labytnangi has an important transport-geographical location. It is the end of

the line railroad station for year-round passenger service from Moscow and Vorkuta. It serves as a transportation and freight hub for the train leading to the Bovanenko natural gas deposits in Yamal. It figures in the construction of such major Russian infrastructure projects as the Northern Latitudinal Line as a key hub on the planned railroad track. Currently the city is heavily subsidized and depends on transfers from the Okrug budget.

Kandalaksha, which produces aluminum, and Apatity, which produces apatite-nepheline ore, are de facto monocities with all the attendant social-economic prob-

lems, but they are not formally included in the official list of monocities in the Russian Federation.

### Conclusion

The Arctic is experiencing some of the fastest changes in climate on the planet. Gaining a better understanding of the cities that currently populate this region will enhance our understanding of how best to address these transformations and how to adapt to the new conditions. (For the author's vision of climate change risks in the Russian Arctic, see Badina 2016, 2020).

### About the Author

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### Acknowledgements

The study was funded by the Russian Foundation of Basic Research: scientific project no. 18-05-60005.